



# Masters of Death: The SS-Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust

*Richard Rhodes*

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## **Masters of Death: The SS-Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust** Richard Rhodes

In *Masters of Death*, Richard Rhodes gives full weight, for the first time, to the part played by the Einsatzgruppen - the professional killing squads deployed in Poland and the Soviet Union, early in World War II, by Himmler's SS. And he shows how these squads were utilized as the Nazis made two separate plans for dealing with the civilian populations they wanted to destroy. Drawing on Nuremberg Tribunal documents largely ignored until now, and on newly available material from eyewitnesses and survivors, Richard Rhodes has given us a book that is essential reading on the Holocaust the World War II.

## **Masters of Death: The SS-Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust Details**

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## From Reader Review Masters of Death: The SS-Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust for online ebook

### Speesh says

I've seen Einsatzgruppen ('Task force, 'task forces,' if you look at the Danish equivalent (as Danish is based on what is now German) you have 'action group' as well) mentioned many places - and I certainly had read snippets of their activities in many other books. This is the first longer history I've both seen and/or read of their setting up, their structure - though it became a free for all - their activities and their range.

But then, understanding. Why DO we feel the need to understand? We cannot, not if we're what you and I would consider 'normal.' These people were not normal in any way, not just one way. They were not all set off by one thing, so we can now say "look, that's what did it!" Just as then there isn't one thing we can do - and relax... We can make sure it doesn't happen again, by constantly working to remove as many of the prejudices against people we don't even pretend to be able to understand, as possible. As the author suggests, the conditioning the German people, the boys especially, the youth, had in the later 19th and early 20th Centuries, enabled what happened later, by conditioning them to violence both towards themselves and as a solution for many of the problems they might face with/from others. As I have tried to think before, the Nazis created a system where if someone was this way inclined, then he/she could be like this - and there were no limits, because they didn't want there to be any limits. To the hate. Once killing vast numbers of people you didn't like and blamed for all your perceived troubles, became talked about openly - by people you respected, or thought you SHOULD respect because they were in positions of authority and you were conditioned to accept that you respected people in positions of authority absolutely, because while you may not understand, they most surely did - then it became normal, your new normal. Then, it just became a problem to be solved, and in came the problem solvers - like Eichman.

Don't get caught up thinking it was Hitler who got the ball rolling. The whole of Europe, well the 'important,' those who can do something about it, part anyway, thought Eugenics was the way to go. It was commonly accepted, unless of course, you were one of the commoners at the wrong end of the eugenic stick. People like Hitler, were conditioned to believe that sort of nonsense and (amongst other things) link it with hundreds, maybe even two thousand years of hatred for what the You Know Whos, did to You Know Who (except they probably didn't, but that's a discussion for elsewhere). My thought is that Hitler had the power to do what in another life he should have just been muttering about in beerhalls.

After Hitler said this kind of thing out loud, the men who would do anything or stop at nothing, to please him and lived for catching crumbs of praise from his high table, did all and more of what they could. The main architect, I get from *Masters of Death*, was Heinrich Luitpold Himmler. And he was (partly) using power as compensation for his own failings, disappointments, inadequacies. And because he could.

But really, as we don't live in those times now, and there are surely only a handful of people left alive who did, we can never fully enter their minds again and 'understand' what and why. I doubt really if even the perpetrators could tell you the why. I say why do we feel we need to know? As I've said before in other reviews and above, our times seem to be all about the smoking gun. The desire to say "ahhh! it was that that caused it! Phew, that's that sorted, what's next?" The reasons are so many and varied and refuse to be tied into neat little packages. It is surely enough to keep repeating what happened to each new generation and be there to stand up and be counted if it looks like it's going that way again. Which it will, if it already isn't.

It is, as the blurb up top says, not easy to track down books on this period. Apart from this book, there aren't many I can find that are reasonably priced and so aren't (I'm thinking) niche, textbooks. Certainly nothing much that the interested, but not that interested reader could commonly be expected to get hold of.

What Richard Rhodes manages to do, is not to numb with statistics. There are a lot of names, places and horrendous numbers of people killed documented here. Especially as there are a lot of Polish and Russian names, it is difficult for an English-born speaker to not rush over the difficult, bad Scrabble-hand town names. But, and I have no explanation for how, Rhodes manages to give them all individual emphasis. Each documented incident strikes home. Each perpetrator or groups of perpetrators is identifiable and clear in my mind as I read. And there were some real bastards on the German side. I've always had an inkling that the Ukrainians and Latvians in particular, enjoyed doing this sort of thing, but they are really nothing compared to some of the mentally disturbed, civilised Nazi good old boys. They make ISIS look like Catholic schoolgirls.

The Einsatzgruppen were the percusers of the Holocaust. As the blurb suggests and the book develops, they were sent in to 'clear up' after the Wehrmacht, then seemed to turn into being a kind of testing ground for ideas of how to 'dispose' of so many people as they found there that they didn't like. How to kill them in the most efficient way? Because back in Berlin, they were worried what killing so many not fighting back people, was doing to previously 'normal' soldiers! Which meant that killing them individually - took too long, used too many bullets, not actually certain enough - or in groups - took too long, not certain enough, time consuming, difficult to keep the next group of people unaware of what they were in for, while killing the group before - wasn't going to be efficient enough to work. And then there was Russia, once that had been conquered. Killing by carbon monoxide in specially constructed vehicles was tried, people came from other areas - the killing of mentally ill and hospital patients - to add their expertise and gradually form a way of killing that might work in larger, specially set up work- and dedicated death-camps was developed. The commander of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss, was in on the later stages and developed on the ideas used in Eastern Europe, for when he was in charge of the camp.

Maybe the book will prove to be too much for a lot of people. But just the fact that it is uncomfortable reading, shouldn't put you off reading it. Now you've heard of the book and what it covers, you owe it to the people who were killed and those who lived through horrors we can not even imagine, to read it.

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## **Morgan Blackledge says**

I have no idea what to say about this book other than it's well written, and it further opened my eyes to the dreadful, ghastly, unspeakable horror of the holocaust.

These words seem banal. And that only increases my esteem for the peerless (and apparently fearless) Richard Rhodes.

He devoted his career to wading into subjects such as this, and he (largely) succeeded in shedding light on this and other mind boggling historical events including the nuclear arms race.

One bit of (reverent) criticism. The psychology that much of this book is founded on e.g. the (somewhat obsolete) theories of criminologist Lonnie Athens, which Rhodes explored further in his book Why They Kill.

Athens's work was state of the art when Rhodes wrote Masters Of Death, but it feels dated by today's standards, and this detracts from the enduring value of the book.

That being said. The scholarship and rendition of the historical material still reads well and remains highly impactful. Particularly if you read the dated psychology with 'loose hands' i.e. with an understanding that the field has advanced, and that the model promoted isn't fact, but is simply one way of conceptualizing violent behavior.

Stupendous!!!!

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### **Mirosław Dworniczak says**

Jedna z najbardziej wstrząsających pozycji, które przeczytałem w ostatnich kilkunastu latach. Niby znam trochę historię Einsatzgruppen, ale dopiero tutaj widuję, jak precyzyjnie przebiegało wykonanie rozkazu Hitlera o wyniszczeniu Żydów. Rhodes jak zawsze wykonuje doskonałą pracę, znajdując setki źródeł, jak te odwiedza wiele miejsc kaźni.

Naprawdę warto tę książkę przeczytać, ale uprzedzam - to jest bardzo trudna lektura. Opis tego, co zrobiono w Lesie Krzyżel z Żydami z Konina przekracza wszelkie granice wyobraźni.

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### **Jim says**

WARNING! This book is very graphic and disturbing. It is truly a horror story of a different sort.

After reading this book, I once told someone, "If a movie were made about this book, without being edited for content, it would be very difficult to watch. It is that graphic and horrifying." MASTERS OF DEATH begins innocently enough, drops you right in the middle of the Holocaust, and shows you the true face of evil.

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### **Justin says**

An omnivorous intellect who has written incisively and authoritatively on a wide variety of subjects, Richard Rhodes here deploys his skills to not just describe, but also to explain the phenomenon of the *Einsatzgruppen* within the Holocaust.

In so doing he makes practical application of the research and "violent socialization" theories of Professor Lonnie Athens, which he had previously explored in his book *Why They Kill: The Discoveries of a Maverick Criminologist*. Like many (perhaps even most) psychological theories, it does not rise to the level of testable, empirical science; however, it does seem to fit with the available evidence, as well as providing a reasonable explanation thereof.

Obviously a chilling, gut-churning read that does not reassure one's faith in humanity, to say the very least.

## Meaghan says

This book is definitely not for the faint of heart! Little has been written about the Einsatzgruppen, the Nazis' mobile killing squads, in large part because their story is so gruesome. One passage that stood out particularly in my mind was a story about how a bunch of Jews, including women and children, were pushed into a pit and then slaked lime was poured over them. Slaked lime is a powerful corrosive and these people essentially dissolved while fully alive. Their sufferings were so awful that not even the Einsatzgruppen tried that again.

This is a very well-researched and -written book, thorough but fairly short, and the author has some interesting theories about how "ordinary men" were driven to kill unarmed civilians over and over. I would recommend, but with the caveat that it's not for the squeamish.

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## Patrick Belair says

I've had this book for a while now, I really didn't know what to expect. More facts than we already know, some one else's take on the facts. I was very surprised by this book, the content of this story is truly disturbing. We all know about the executions, the starvation, beatings etc.

What it contains is a true and detailed history of the final solution from the planning to its implementation and near success. Of course 6 million dead is not trivial. The sheer scope of Himmler and Hitler's plans boggles the mind. And how people followed this plan puzzles me. If you're studying this period in time or this event check this book out !!

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## Jessaka says

They are ripping children out of the arms of their mothers down at the Mexican border, putting them in cages with little warm clothing. Where is the outrage? I know it is there because it has to be, but is it enough? Isn't this illegal? What happened to humanity? To America?

Hitler tested the people of Germany by first shooting Jews on the streets, letting them fall dead into trenches. Where was the outrage? There was none. Some cheered. He continued. Later he took them away, put them in camps and let them starve, with little food or clothing. And as they weakened, and maybe even before, he gassed them.

Who are these people who do such things, and who are the men who follow? They are the ones who want a fight, who have been physically abused by one of their parents; they are the men who have been trained to kill. These are the men that Hitler wanted in his military and in his government. He picked the violent ones, and the ones he could train. They are the loyal ones, but even they were afraid of him, as they should be, for he could turn on anyone one of them at any given moment, because unlike them, he had no loyalties.

Is this the country we want?

Am I wrong to compare? Some yes, but then there are Jews, those who have studied history, who say that I am not. They are the ones who can see into the future, so to speak.

Update: I spoke too soon about the lack of interest in helping the children at the border, and while Trump had his mind changed as to taking children away from their parents, they have not been returned to them. He now keeps devising other ways to deal with the border, with the Hispanics.

In the beginning, in Germany, the Jews were killed on the streets. They made Russian prisoners of war dig long trenches, and then they grabbed the children out of their parent's arms and lined them up with the women and men. I know, I am repeating myself here, just as history repeats itself.

Hitler's SS men sometimes had nervous breakdowns due to having killed and watched and the killings of the women and children. Listening to the wailing, seeing death, and knowing that some had been buried alive, and some had crawled out of their grave but had died a few feet away. A few escaped in the night and lived to tell. So many people had been buried in the trenches that poisonous gases formed and the drinking water was being polluted. There had to be a better way, even a way to prevent the mental breakdowns of the SS men.

How could people kill others so easily? First, it took demonizing the Jews, calling them "animals" just as Trump has called the Hispanics "animals," "rapists" and "criminals." It is that easy. Make them the enemy. Next, train your men well, and try to get men who have been abused as children, just as I have said, for they are the easiest to train, to make violent. Then the other men would just have to follow orders or else. Those who just did as told were often the ones who had nervous breakdowns. So they devised a way to gas the Jewish people, a way that would distance Hitler's men from the killings. The Jews would go quietly into a truck where gas was then released; the same with the death camps. I thought of the drones that we are producing now, the buttons that men have to push, the not seeing. And Hitler then had the bodies burned instead of polluting the land.

"'People must be motivated to kill others, or else they would not do so.' In fact, motivation is not sufficient by itself to produce serious violence; people must also have undergone prior violent experiences: they must have learned to be violent and must have come to identify themselves as violent. Otherwise their intense hatreds will emerge as ugly but nonviolent behaviors."

Himmler, the head of the SS had said, "For him (Hitler) I could do anything. Believe me, if Hitler were to say I should shoot my mother, I would do it and be proud of his confidence."

Yet, to be in Hitler's presence, and to hear unfavorable comments by Hitler towards him, caused even Himmler to become so upset as to produce violent reactions, which took the form of severe stomach pains. To watch people be murdered upset him as well, and I think he suffered a breakdown as well. He chose not to watch, to just give orders. After all, like Hitler, he wanted to make Germany great.

"About ninety children packed together into two small rooms in filthy state. Their whimpering could be heard in the vicinity of the house. Some of the children, mainly infants, were completely exhausted and almost lifeless."

Nobody came for them.

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## Michael Flanagan says

Rhodes delivers a book like few others, the sheer horrific nature of the subject is delivered in such a way that pulls at your soul. A difficult book to read at times but a must for all if only to remind us why it can never happen again. Rhodes gives a masterful mix of fact and firsthand accounts from both sides and delves into

the question how can humanity visit the horror of the holocaust on itself.

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## Melody Boggs says

Anyone who considers themselves a Holocaust historian--or anyone who enjoys reading of the Holocaust for knowledge and remembrance's sake--needs to pick up this book at some point in their life. This book is both easy to read yet nearly unbearable to get through. Rhodes makes a clear argument of how the *Einsatzgruppen* were able to kill as many people as they did--using Lonnie Athens' theory of violent-socialization--through mass shootings and other executions. He draws from a historical record comprising of Nazi documentation from pre-, during, and post-World War II, perpetrator confessions, and survivor testimonies that have largely been unexplored in Holocaust historiography. It is these quoted accounts that make the book so hard to read due to their stark imagery of violence, cruelty, and brutality--words that are, honestly, not strange or new terms attributed to the Holocaust. It is exactly for these reasons that this book should be read thoroughly by any reader who can handle it--and I urge you to at least try even if you think you cannot.

The book especially explores Reinhard Heydrich (the head of the Reich Security Main Office and the second most powerful man in the SS)'s psyche as well as that of Heinrich Himmler, the leader of the SS, particularly noting the fact that, for two men who ordered the deaths of millions of people, they never killed any of these people themselves. As a result, the psychological damage endured by *Einsatzgruppen* leaders and soldiers are also explored here, such damage taking place only a verification of how wrong killing these people were--and how aware they were of that fact, as well.

So, yes, give it a read, and be prepared to think on the text long after you've turned the final, grueling page.

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## Jarrold says

This is a necessary book, but not a very "uplifting" read. We walk through the eastern front as the SS-Einsatzgruppen murder innocent people. The descriptions and accounts are horrible. They come from first and second hand accounts of the massacres. People that witnessed and escaped the atrocities.

What is missing is the death camps and how they actually came to be. The immediacy of them is described, but there is no talk of the construction or running of them. There aren't accounts of conditions of the camps such as Dachau or Auschwitz where many many people were slaughtered. What this book covers is the early stages of the murders and how the Holocaust came into being. Murder pits and slaughter. Again, not uplifting, but quite necessary.

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## Steve says

Interesting book on the Einsatzgruppen, The SS special task force developed by Heinrich Himmler in Nazi Germany. This was the blueprint to the Holocaust. The Einsatzgruppen invaded with the German army parts of eastern Poland and Russia, for the first phase of Hitler's Final Solution. They murdered more than 1.5 million men, women, and children between 1941-1943. These death squads dug pits and executed them.

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### **G.M. Burrow says**

One of the most difficult books I've read. Reviews had told me that it was gruesome -- too gruesome for some to finish. One reader couldn't get past page 30. But I bought it, read it (about thirty minutes at a time; no more), and finished it for one simple reason: I wanted to know. I wanted to know the name of every Jew that died by bullets, by beating, by gas, by burning alive, by suffocating beneath the bodies in the mass graves. It kills me that I will never know them all. That I will never know their stories. It kills me until I remember that they were given life by the One who also wrote them as victims into His story, and that by Him even the hairs of their heads are numbered. He knows their names. He knows them all.

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### **Beata says**

Completely overwhelming account of nazi atrocities by nazi Germany throughout Central and Eastern Europe.

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### **Lewis Weinstein says**

This had a few useful details for me, but mostly provided the kind of horrific examples of German criminal brutality that I have decided not to repeat in my current novel, since it has been covered often by people far more knowledgeable than me, including some who experienced it directly and survived. I will write about my characters reaction to those horrors, and their attempts to get Churchill and FDR to do something to save the Jews, which of course they never did.

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